



# The People of Baltistan

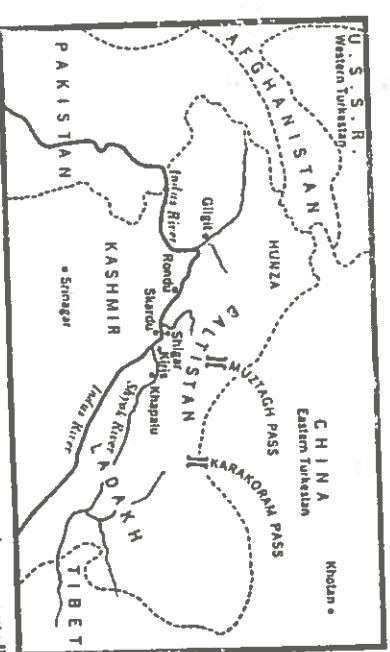
A transitional culture of Central Asia

By JAMES HURLEY

**H**IGH ASIA WAS INTRODUCED to much of the world only seventy years ago in a book by E. E. Knight called *Where Three Empires Meet*. Although one of these "Three Empires"—that of the British—has now passed away, recent moves in High Asia by the Chinese have revived interest in the area. Yet knowledge of this remote region has remained remarkably unchanged since the latter nineteenth century. Knight's work, which became almost a textbook for more than a generation of British school children, was mainly concerned with Hunza, a tiny mountain principality that was situated about the meeting place of British India, Russia, and China. But Knight also touched briefly on Baltistan, or Little Tibet, a fascinating and still relatively unknown region lying off the main routes and passes, then, as now, out of the main political arena of the contending powers.

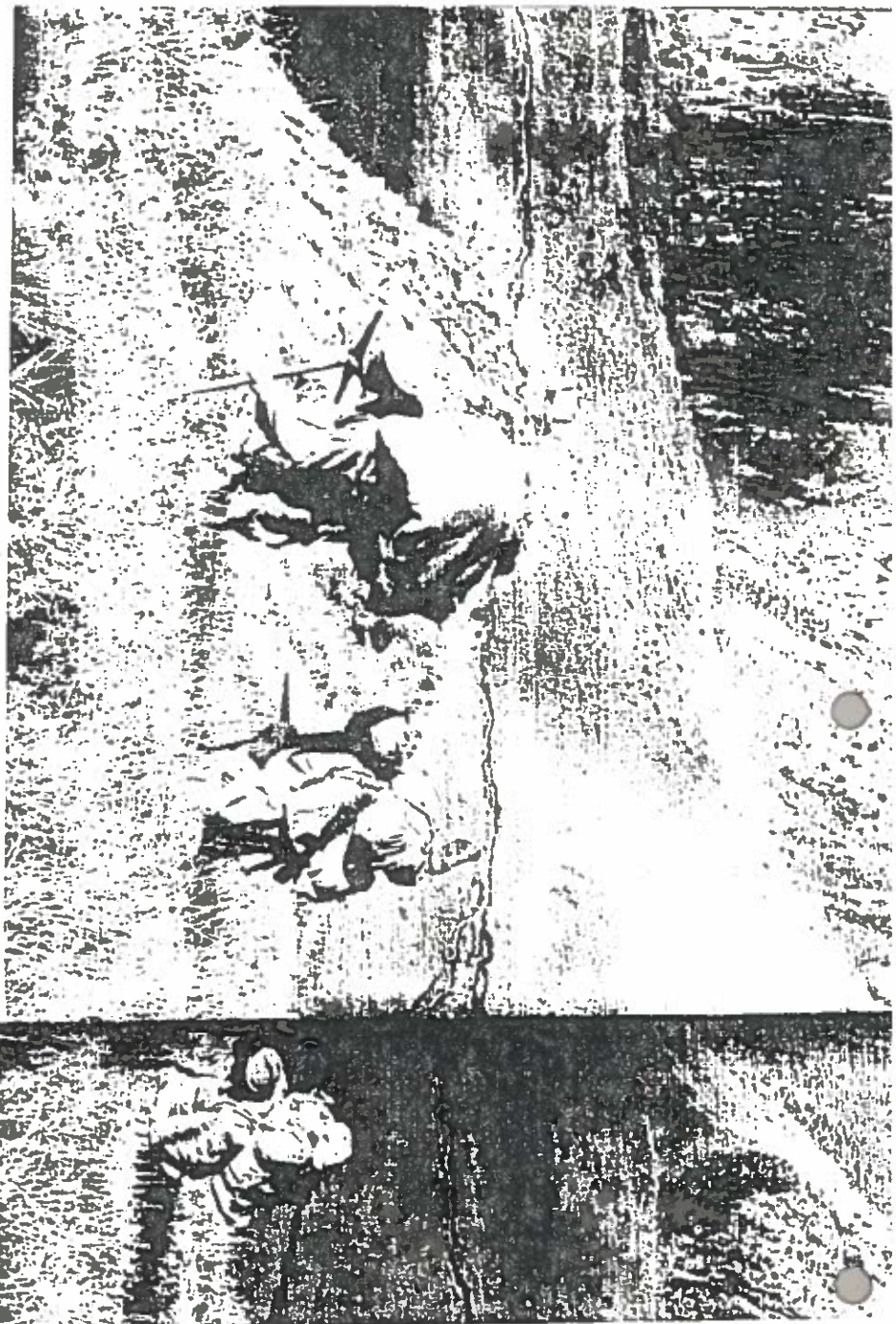
Who are the Balti and why is their country sometimes called Little Tibet?

Briefly, the Balti are of mixed Mongoloid and Caucasian racial stock; they speak a language of the Tibeto-Burman family; and they are followers of the prophet Mohammed. This unusual combination of race, language, and religion probably exists nowhere else in the entire Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. In fact, Baltistan is one of the important transition areas between East and West; it marks the farthest westward extension of the Tibetan language and culture, and quite possibly the farthest eastward penetration by the Caucasoid into one of the most formidable mountain lookouts on the world's surface. One can well imagine how painfully slow must have been their progress if one looks at a relief map that shows the successive complex of the Hindu Kush, Pamir, and Karakoram ranges, which thrust innumerable ice-capped ramparts, high glaciers, and deep gorges in the way of any intruders into the region.



Map of the region of Baltistan, showing the Indus River, Gilgit, Shigar, Skardu, and Srinagar. The map also shows the proximity to the U.S.S.R. and Afghanistan.





HEAVY LOADS PORTERS climb up steep southern slope of the 16,600-foot Skoro



La, one of the many passes separating the inhabited valleys from one another.

sources of knowledge—not only for remote places such as Balhistan, but also for many areas in India as well. Journeying from northwestern India to Balhistan in about A.D. 632, Hsuan Tsang recorded: "... after climbing precipices and crossing valleys, we go up the course of the Shata (Indus) River; and then, by the help of flying bridges and footways made of wood across the chasms and precipices...

we arrive at the country of Fud-to (Bolor or Balhistan). It stands in the midst of the great Snowy Mountains. It produces wheat and pulse, gold and silver. Thanks to the quantity of gold, the country is rich in supplies... the people are rough and rude in character; and as for politeness, such

a thing has not been heard of. They are coarse and despicable in appearance... their letters are nearly like those of India, their language somewhat different. There are about a hundred *sangharanus* [monasteries] in the country with something like a thousand priests, who show no great zeal for learning and are careless in their moral conduct."

Not a very complimentary passage, but it does provide us with facts on which we can almost surely rely. Although historical circumstances have changed greatly over the last 1,300 years, much of what Hsuan Tsang said is still appropriate. For example, the difficulties of the route along the deep Indus gorge between Gilgit and

Skardu are virtually the same. Hsuan Tsang's comment on the language is especially interesting in that it may refer to the Tibetan script (which was adopted from the Indian) and thereby indicate that Balhistan had already been subject to Tibetan influence for a considerable period. Whatever script was used—and we know almost nothing of what it was—it has long since been discarded (probably about the time of the Moslem conquest), being considered a relic of idolatry. Balhistan enters the picture again, briefly but dramatically, in the eighth century annals of the Tang Dynasty. During the sixth and seventh centuries, China had been extending its sway over the western region—Turk-

men—as it has been doing again in modern times. In the latter part of the seventh century, the unified kingdom of Tibet arose, and what had been until that time only a disorganized collection of quarrelsome tribes suddenly became a major power with which the Chinese had to contend.

In the struggle that soon developed for eastern Turkistan, Balhistan became of critical importance—the only time it has been so important in its whole existence! Its possession was the key to Turkistan for the Tibetans because, when taken, it would permit them to attack the flank of the Chinese garrisons around the perimeter of the Taklamakan Desert, which were at

Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, and Kara-shar. Between A.D. 696 and 741, the Balhi, fearing attack from the Tibetans, sent several missions to the Chinese court. One of the results was the conclusion of a marriage alliance—always important in the East—between a Balhi prince and a Tang princess. The Tang rulers also sent 4,000 Chinese soldiers in A.D. 722 to assist the Balhi in repelling the Tibetan invaders. But all was for naught, and the Tibetans overran Balhistan in 737. Ten years later, in 747, the area changed hands again when a Chinese force re-established Tang influence.

The year 747 was an important one in Central Asia, for that August a force of 10,000 Chinese, under the Korean general Kao Hsien-chih, crossed the formidable barrier of the Pamir and Hindu Kush to the west and wiped out the Tibetan garrison at Gilgit. The political importance of this event was great, for it came at a critical time in history and forestalled a tie-up between the Tibetans and the rapidly advancing Arabs on the west, who were already in western Turkistan. It is difficult to imagine how the face of Asia might look now had there been a joint Arab-Tibetan invasion of China. The Chinese march into Gilgit is equally remarkable as a feat of logistics. It marks the only time a major military force has crossed this continental divide between China and India, and it has been held to compare with, or even surpass, the great Alpine feats of such commanders as Hannibal and Napoleon.

However, the Chinese victory was only temporary: within a few years they were thrown out of Turkistan, not to return for more than a thousand years. In A.D. 751, Balhistan was permanently overpowered by the Tibetans. Thereafter, there are no references to the area in Chinese annals. In fact, for the next six centuries Balhi history is almost a complete blank. We know nothing of how long the Tibetans stayed, what the nature of their rule was, or what cultural interpenetration took place. It has been surmised that the Tibetan occupation was relatively short and that the suzerainty exercised was nominal. This seems a reasonable premise in view of the great distance—more than 2,000 miles—separating Balhistan from Tibet, Khotan, Kucha. Of even more historical relevance is the fact that, by

the end of the ninth century, Tibet's power—and with it that mountain nation's one serious bid to be a world power—had passed. But even during this brief period, we may assume that much of the racial admixture we see now in Balhistan had taken place.

The blank of the next few centuries is not even penetrated by Marco Polo. That notable medieval traveler and observer, when he passed several hundred miles to the north in the thirteenth century on his way to the court of Kublai Khan, made only the briefest reference to the mountainous area of Bolor lying to the south. He gave no geographic details of this region, but earlier students of his travels thought Balhistan might fall within it. The modern view, however, is that Polo meant only the country lying between the great bend of the Indus (at Gilgit) and the Pamirs.

Not until the end of the fifteenth century do we begin to get some sort of sketchy idea of the Balhi in their present historical setting. It was then that the new Moslem rulers of Kashmir began to take an interest in their mountain neighbor to the northeast. The Hindu kings who had ruled Kashmir up to the middle of the fourteenth century may have exercised loose control over the Balhi from time to time, but on the whole, Balhistan had probably retained its independence. Now the Moslem sultans looked at it possibly with an eye to linking up with eastern Turkistan, where the population had embraced Islam some time during or soon after the wars, in the ninth century, of Tibet's monarchy.

For unknown centuries before this Moslem influx, the Balhi had been Buddhist. We know this mainly from carvings and graffiti on rocks—showing such typically Buddhist subjects as jharana monuments and bodhisattvas—which are still visible at several places in Balhistan (the large one near Skardu, shown on pages 22-23, is considered the finest example). We have no direct evidence as to when the Balhi became Buddhist, but it appears to have happened sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries. Hsuan Tsang's reference to the priests and monasteries, already quoted, is the only positive clue. But these rock carvings also tell us something else: they indicate the existence of an earlier, pre-Buddhist religion. Among the crude figures carved on the rocks, now little

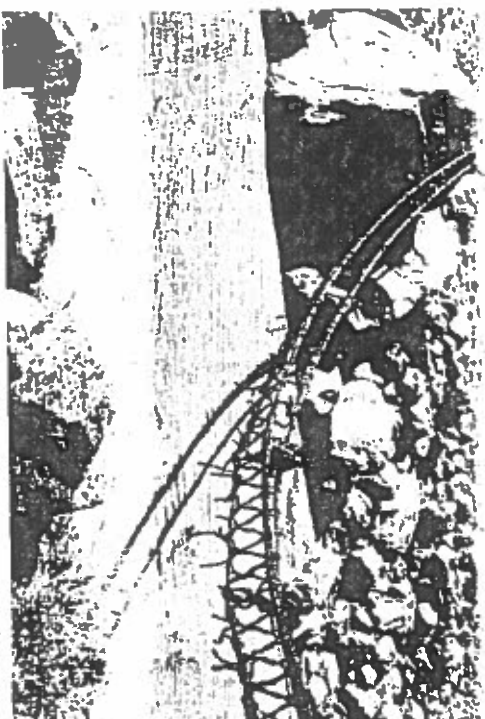
# People of Baltistan

Agriculture, herding, and dairy farming form the basis of

the Balti economy

By  
JAMES HURLEY

Rope snare casts a shadow on Brahlu River as Balti porters cross. Bridge is



made of interwoven branches, with a stick at mid-span to spread handrails.

**D**URING THE TWO CENTURIES that the British stayed in India, they penetrated into nearly every corner of the country and found out almost all there was to know about it. This was not only because of British administrative and security needs, but also because of a national penchant for adventure—combined, in many cases with a taste for scholarly endeavor and interest in the culture. Thus was produced a wealth of factual and descriptive books that will long remain a monument to British rule in India. The “District Gazetteers,” in particular, are exemplary, for they relate in minute detail all that was known at the time about the people of a given district—their history, ethnology, language, folklore, and economy.

But for Baltistan, there were no “District Gazetteers,” since the country was both distant and under another administration, that of the Maharaja of Kashmir. The British did not extend their rule into north India until the middle of the nineteenth century, and for various reasons, including administrative expedience, they left Kashmir and its several frontier districts in the hands of a Hindu ruler for the next hundred years. There were few of them, and they generally served as “advisers.” Their numbers grew, however, during times of military or political tension.

Because Kashmir occupied a strategic position at India’s juncture with China, Russia, and Tibet, and because

the maintenance of cordial relations with the ruling prince was important to the regime at Delhi, it was necessary to obtain permits to visit the area. This was only a formality in the case of Srinagar and the Kashmir Valley, but it took on real meaning as applied to such frontier areas as Baltistan and Ladakh. However, when it became known that the hunting was excellent and that prize they heads were to be had in the faraway karakoram, red tape disappeared in the face of attacks from that formidable breed known as “the British sportsman.” And so the region was “discovered.”

**I**N the latter nineteenth century, Sir Francis Younghusband’s daring trip from Peking across the Gobi Desert and into India over the Muztagh Pass excited world interest in the Karakoram. Soon after that, the great scientific and mountaineering expeditions began to arrive. The first, in 1892, was mainly British, led by Sir William Conway. The expedition penetrated to the Badkora Glacier, one of the largest glaciers in the world outside of polar regions. The members mapped much of the tributary glacier system and climbed several peaks.

Between 1899 and 1912, Mrs. Fanny Bullock Workman, an American, and her husband, Dr. William Hunter Workman, conducted five expeditions to Baltistan and the Karakoram. Other major scientific and mountaineering expeditions in the early years of this century were those of the Duke of the Abruzzi, 1907-09, and of an-



Am skins of a skin roll are tightened and crisscrossed after trip down Shigar

River in Baltistan. Normally used in cold water, the rolls can ride rapids.





BOTTOM: PREPARE TO ferry passengers across Shyok River at Klapatu. Come, grass baskets on villagers' backs are made in accord with the size of user.

other Italian, Dr. Filippo de Filippi, in 1913-14. The territory covered by both expeditions overlapped the Karakoram (i.e., Baltistan) and Chinese Turkestan. In 1921-24, the Americans Katherine and Robert LeMaye Harret spent a year trekking and climbing in Baltistan and Ladakh. Since then, and particularly in the last ten years, the Karakoram have become

an international mountaineering playground. Each year from two to four expeditions contend for the honor of reaching the tops of perhaps a score of unclimbed peaks over 20,000 feet. Americans have had a good share in the conquests of some of them, including Hidden Peak and Masherbrum, and have acquitted themselves well on the 21,250-foot K-2, the second highest

mountain in the world, after Everest. What is Baltistan like and how does one reach it? These questions are asked even in Pakistan, for few Pakistanis have had the opportunity of perhaps desiring to go there. The usual tendency is to confuse Baltistan with Baluchistan, one of Pakistan's provinces to the southwest. Yet the area is within ninety minutes' flying time from Rawalpindi, Pakistan's capital.

The plane ride (the alternative is a twenty-day mule track over the high and forbidding Derasai Plateau) is exciting enough to thrill the most sophisticated traveler. The plane skirts just above successively rising ranges and peaks, and skits the northwestern side of sprawling, snow- and ice-capped Nanga Parbat, called the "German killer" for the twenty-six German and porters killed on it in the 1930's. Shortly before arriving at Skardu, the plane sweeps into the Indus Gorge, whose walls often seem to hem it in on three sides. Skimming close above one last, high huddle, the plane lands on Skardu's baked mud field.

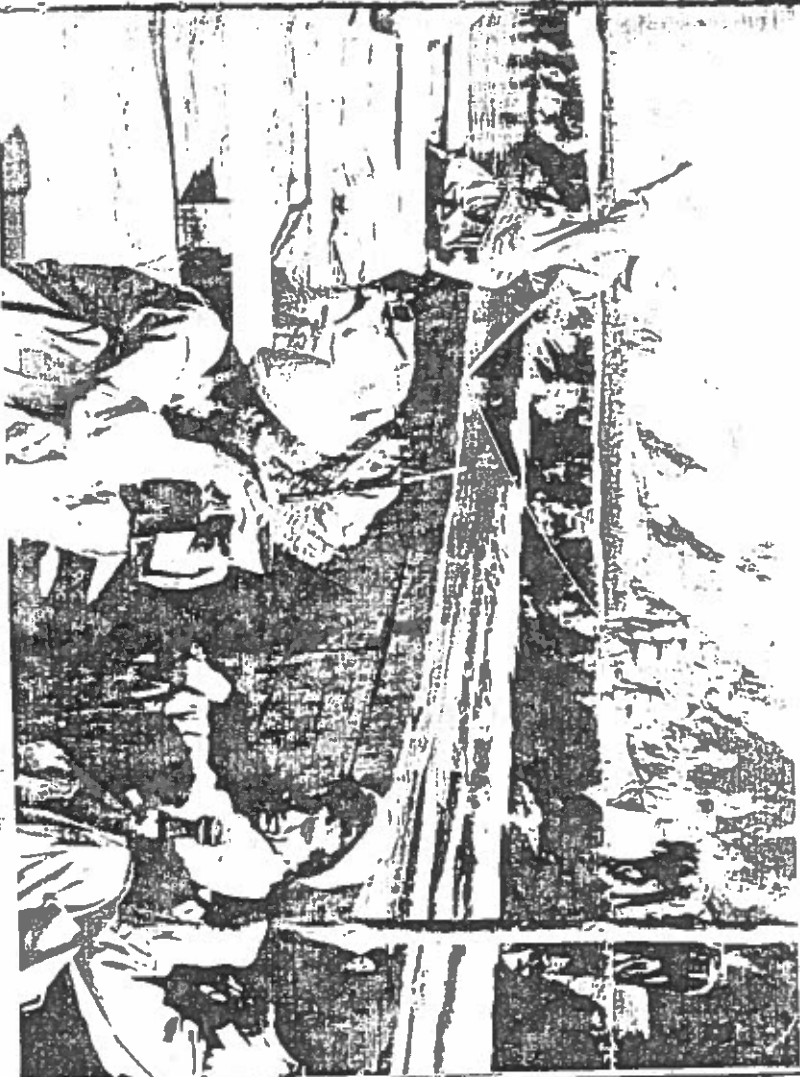
Skardu is the administrative and trading center of Baltistan, and it is here that one finds the greatest diversity of races and tongues. In the bazaar, I hear-speaking Torkis from Kasgar, Pushtoons from Peshawar,

In numerous small tea shops, one hears some of the dialects and tongues that illustrate the different streams of humanity now comprising Skardu's population: Butchhaki from Hunza, Shina from Gilgit, Khosar from Chitral, and sometimes Sindhi or Bengali.

Tons linguistic melange has affected the local language, and pure Balti is hardly spoken in Skardu any more. The local patois is such a mixture of Urdu, Balti, Hindi, and Persian that the Balti from other villages say it is hardly understandable. For trading and administrative purposes, Urdu (one of the official languages of Pakistan) is the lingua franca.

The populated part of Baltistan, which lies on the southern and western flanks of the Great Karakoram chain, is made up of a number of valleys. The first of these valleys is that of the great Indus River, running northwest from its source in Tibet, and the rest

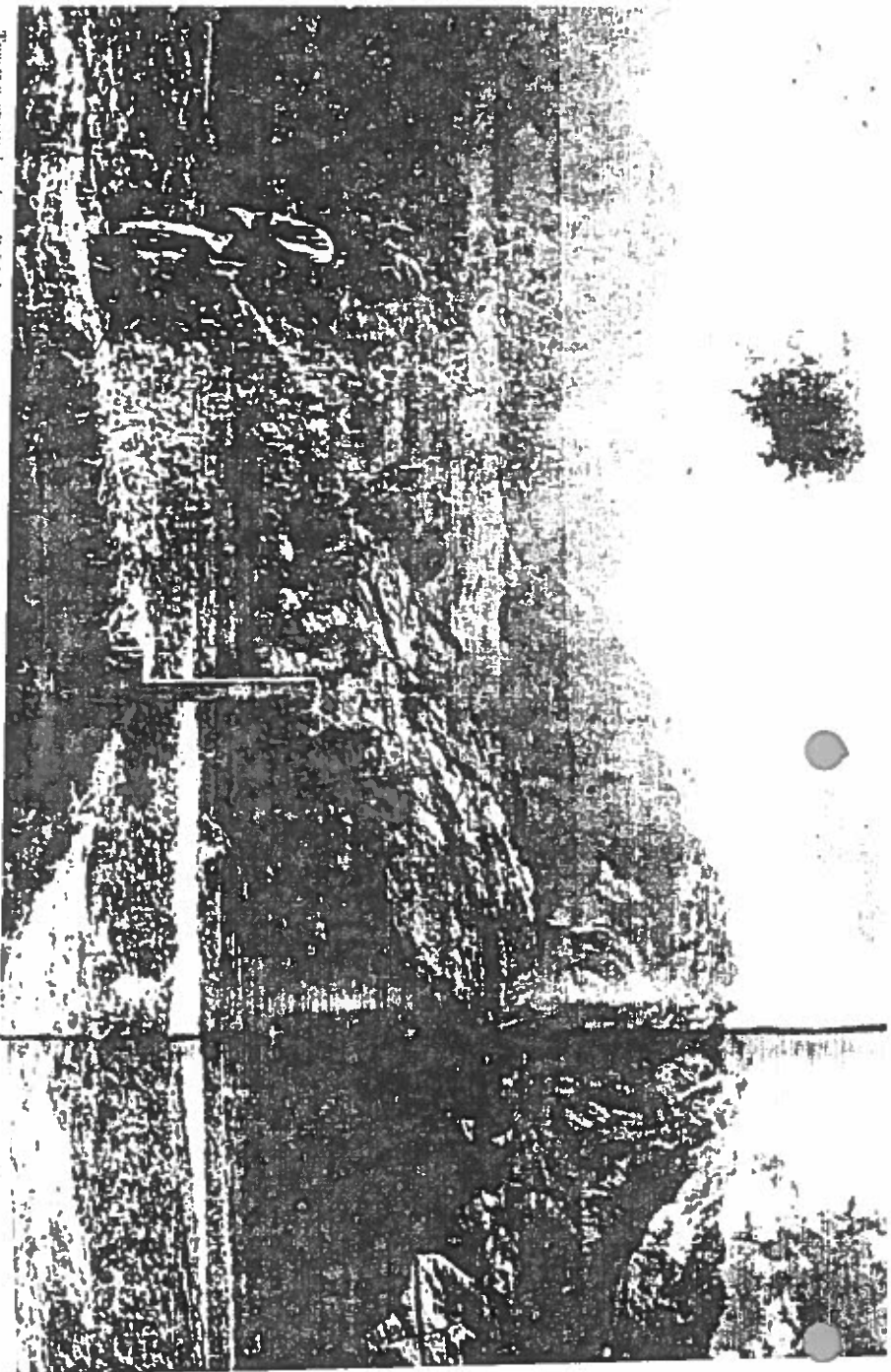
are those of tributary rivers, such as the Shyok and Shigar, and a number of lesser, glacier-fed streams—the Ilushu, Thalle, Brahlu, and Baslu. From at least the time of the Moslem conversion, local rulers have presided over seven of these valleys or valley sections: Skardu, Klapatu, Shigar, Roundu, Kiver, Naranang, and Tohi. From time to time, other principalities have risen but have usually been short-lived. As far back as is known, these local rulers—called variously *regan*, *tham*, *sultan* and *raja*—have been fighting among themselves. Only in a few instances has a leader arisen influential enough to unite them all—Ali Sher Khan Atchan of Skardu and Ali Mir of Klapatu (and these two are possibly the same person) are the main ones. But generally the raja of Skardu has enjoyed a traditional position of pre-eminence, perhaps because Skardu has always been, as far as we know, Baltistan's trade center.



FERRY ON Indus is pulled upstream by As it nears bank, passengers jump in and help pole to the opposite shore.



Snowmelt rapids of upper Shigar on a skin raft gave author some anxious moments. Air bladders may be rebuffed by boatmen while the raft is in motion.



Tossing grain in air, a Baluch farmer separates chaff from the kernels of wheat crop in Shigar Valley, Brecon



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Points in circuit show thresh grain in the Hindu Valley, an area noted in

separates chaff from the kernels of grain by blowing it away to the side.

ing on the season. In summer, when pluckers melt, it is virtually impossible to cross the raging torrents that are little more than gentle mountain streams at other times of the year. Various types of bridges have been constructed by the Baluch to overcome this. One of them is the rope bridge. Made of woven leathernets, it is used mainly to span the larger rivers, in climbing the Indus. Crossing one for the first time is an experience not soon forgotten. The trickiest part occurs in the middle of the bridge, where one must climb over or under a stick holding apart the two leathernets; the choice poses a dilemma since the height of the stick makes either move awkward.

In the valleys that have stable perennial streams, crude but sturdy wooden bridges on the cantilever principle have been built at important crossings. They consist of one arch, whose sup-

porting timbers project over other timbers leaning from the bank. The shore ends are weighted with masonry. Where the valley widens and the freshet divides into small channels, local villagers merely bridge them with crudely hewn planks or logs. To my mind, crossing these is a harrowing experience, for some are twenty to twenty-five feet long and have a most unpleasant tendency to timber-pose in the middle. The combination of up and down motion with the illusion of sideward movement from looking at the rushing water is maddening.

Probably the most enjoyable mode of travel in Baluchistan is by yak (raft), a stick frame lashed onto two down or more inflated goatskins. Zeds are used

BATAI moves camp near Kharmama, in Hindu Valley. Surplus may be bartered.





"A glance at the sun reminds Gubli that *zan* must be ready soon. Calling over the roof to her neighbor, she asks for *mech* (fire). A little girl reaches through the thorns and hands her a few embers in a broken piece of earthenware. To this Gubli adds bits of rotted wood for tinder and soon her hearth is ready. The large copper caldron, half-filled with water, boils soon, and she throws into it several handfuls of roasted barley flour, stirring until the mix thickens. Hesitantly she takes a chunk of dirty white butter and melts it, carefully picking out the goat hairs. The family cannot afford melted butter every day. Gubli does not have to call the family—they are suddenly there as she puts the steaming mass on a large metal plate on the

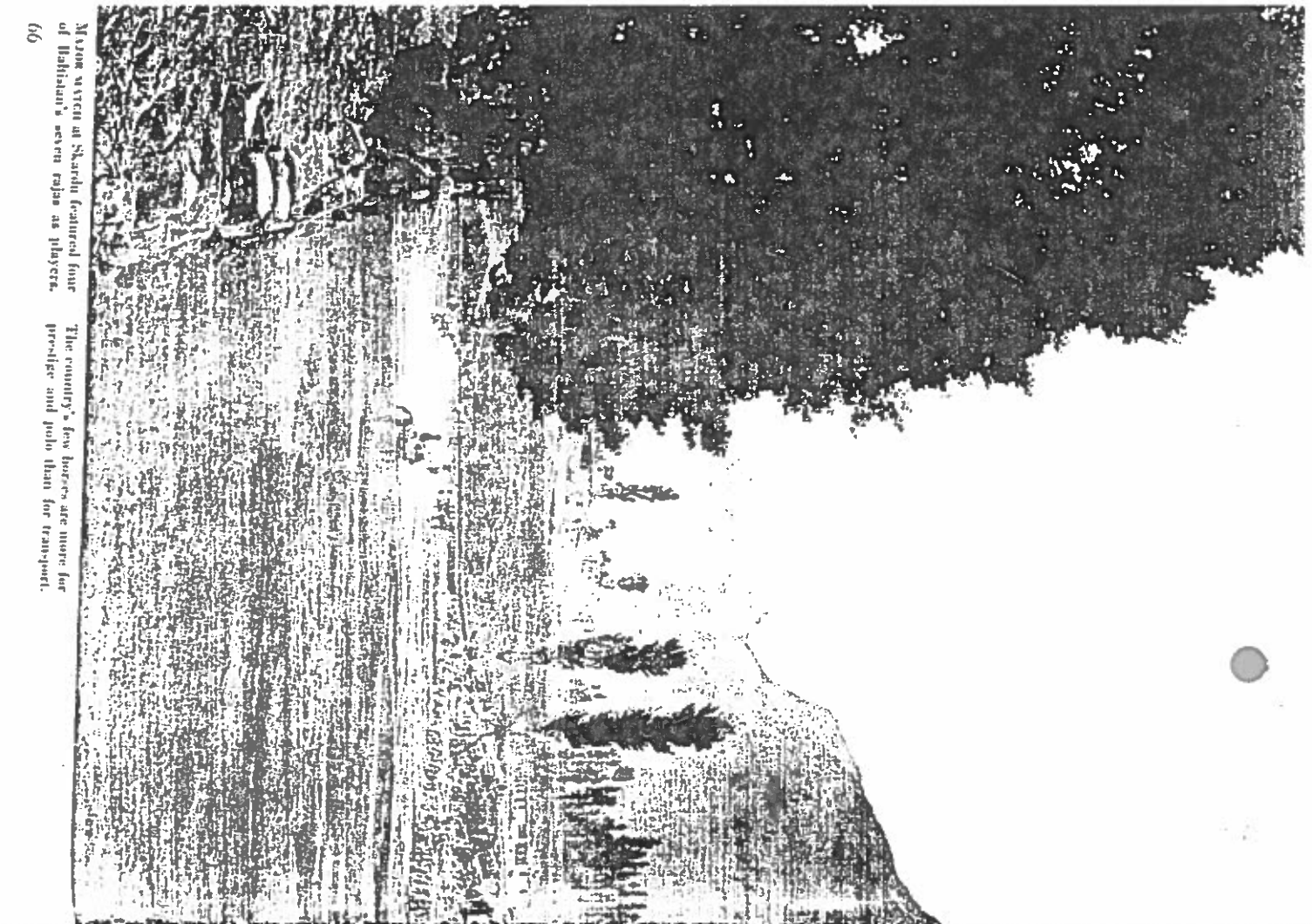
floor. The family attacks the fat-rich food vigorously. Tomorrow the main meal will consist of *zan* accompanied only by a sauce of green herbs.

ON the mountainside across the valley, since first light, younger villagers have been busy cutting and uprooting *burtse* (wild artemisia). This dry-looking plant, invisible at a distance, is both the food of the ibex and the only free fuel the villagers can stockpile against the coming winter. Occasionally an apricot tree may be cut down or a small amount of row dung dried, but *burtse* is the main solution to the fuel problem.

"On the way home, one of the young *burtse* young (gatherers of *burtse*) sees an ibex and says he wishes he had a



EYRING ACTION. Multi operators at a polo match let gates stray from game.



MAJOR MATCH at Shardu featured four of Mahliani's seven talas as players.

The country's few horses are more for prestige and polo than for transport.